

INTRODUCTION

Thinking back to my childhood, I really don't remember Advent being a part of the Christmas season. I do remember the presents, family gatherings, the decorations, the reading of the Christmas story, and all the desserts. But not any sort of thinking around Advent. I know that we all come from different family cultures and traditions around the Christmas season that have shaped the way we celebrate this season with our families, but we here at Burnt Hickory want to encourage you to give the season of Advent and this Advent Devotional a chance this year. So, for those of you that did not grow up celebrating the Advent season, what is Advent?

“Advent,” in the Christian since, is a word that describes a season of preparation or anticipation of the coming or visiting of Jesus. Advent, in its inception, was a period of preparation of new believers to be baptized on the day of Epiphany (January 6). Starting later in the 7th century, the Roman Christians attached the word Advent to the anticipation of Jesus's return at his second coming. In the Middle Ages, believers began to look to Advent as a season of preparation and celebration of the birth and anticipated return of Jesus. Today, at Burnt Hickory and in much of the Christian world, Advent is much more than a countdown to Christmas day. It is a time of hope-filled expectation. It is a time of re-centering ourselves and reflecting on Jesus, the One who came to “save His people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21, NIV) and a time to eagerly watch for the final return of Christ Jesus.

Please know that during the Sundays of Advent, we will be looking into four different themes of life that occur as we wait in anticipation. We are looking at the HOPE, JOY, LOVE, and PEACE that Jesus brings with His coming, living, death, and resurrection. This devotional will give you so many more peeks into what the season and promises of Jesus bring as you prepare for Him. We hope that these traditions and devotions will aid you in your Advent reflections!

May God bless you and your family as you prepare for His coming.



Matt Petty
Senior Pastor | Burnt Hickory Baptist Church

HOPE.

A PRESCRIPTION OF HOPE

by Matt Reed

I work with brain surgeons. Really, I do! While most people joke about the things it “doesn’t take a brain surgeon” to do, I spend many hours in operating rooms with incredibly skilled neurosurgeons who cautiously and meticulously remove brain tumors - and other problems that effect the health of our brains. My role in surgery is to make sure a machine called a Stealth Navigation System works correctly. The skill and training of the doctors combined with the technology of the machine make it possible to remove the tumor faster and with more precision, without causing harm to the remaining healthy parts of the brain. After removal of the tumor, many patients recover and live longer. They have renewed hope and a prescription for a healthier future even though tough days of recovery are in front of them.

GODISNOWHERE. What words jump out to you when you read those letters? Was it “God is nowhere?” or “God is now here?” What is interesting, and a bit ironic, is that God is the constant in both phrases. The Holy Spirit of God has been a constant in all the parts of my life. Even through extremely tough days, like the loss of loved ones, or during the incredible days such as the birth of children, church and family celebrations, and career successes, God has been there. He can be there for you too. If you’re struggling with an issue, know that there is eternal hope for everyone who places their belief in God’s son, Jesus Christ. The New Testament book of 1 Peter, in Chapter 1, teaches an incredible truth of how Jesus fulfilled God’s plan and now we have hope and assurance of a future in heaven if we believe in Him and acknowledge what Jesus has done. It will change your perspective.

Maybe I should ask: What are you hoping for today? Will that hope be found in a present under the Christmas tree, perhaps a much-needed raise in pay, or maybe just enough strength to make it through the day? Have the things you’ve hoped for changed over time or is the item you’ve been hoping to get for many years still escaping your grasp? Or have you quit hoping for anything, having grown weary from the pursuit, frustrated that you still haven’t found what you’ve been looking for. Whatever the case may be, remember the letters above and focus your hope into the perspective of “God is Now Here.” Ask God to fill you with hope for today and the future. Do it today! Then you will have a prescription of hope. Hope that is centered around the promises of God, personified in Jesus Christ, will give you the right perspective for every day of life.

Ask yourself: which phrase did you first see in the letters — GODISNOWHERE? How would your personal belief and acknowledgement of Jesus Christ effect your hope for today and future days?

ARE YOU PREPARED FOR HIM?

by John Crenshaw

When my boys were little, they watched a movie in which one of the characters was trying out for a part in a play. This character repeated the phrase, “I hope I get it! I hope I get it!” over and over, which was then mimicked multiple times by my boys.

I don’t remember if he got it or not. There were no car chases, so I quickly lost interest, but the obvious truth is that almost everyone has hope. My mother-in-law faithfully bought lottery tickets every week in hopes that she would win and could live a lifestyle of ease and wealth. As we age, many of us hope we can hang on to our jobs until retirement – so we can live a lifestyle supposedly free of stress and worry that’s usually brought on by the boss.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:19, “If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied” (NIV). As Christians, we profess a hope in eternal life, in which the things of this life pale and vanish in comparison. But what if, as Paul were saying, our only hope was in this life – just as we and so many others are focused on our next big achievement or purchase? How can we, as believers, differentiate ourselves from those who do not share our heavenly vision?

To me, we must live a life of anticipation – preparing for the future in two actionable ways. First, we must “do [our] best to present [ourselves] to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15, NIV). In other words, we must be constantly learning in order to nurture and embolden the hope within ourselves. Secondly, we should also serve gladly in order to demonstrate that hope to others – through our time, tithes, and talents.

As the leader of the household, I have to set an example for my family by remaining steadfast through the struggles and trials we face. This is only possible by the hope that our circumstances will get better, and by the hope and expectation that ultimately, we will be rewarded for staying true to Christ. But like the first time a newborn baby sleeps straight through the night, there is joy in the morning through these various trials.

So our hope for the future gives us joy in the present. What is your hope, and how does that hope affect what you are doing to prepare for Him? Make a list of the things you are hopeful for in this life and eternally, then notate what actions you are taking to support and fulfill each of them.

HOPE TO OVERCOME

by Matt Trickel

What comes to mind when you think of depression, worry, or regret? Unspiritual? A sickness best treated with peppy music and cliché-riddled Christianese? Some call it holy and defend it with the label of realism: open eyes that see things as they truly are. At its core, it is fundamental sadness.

Do you know what it feels like? The sadness that seems to be part of all things. Sometimes the sadness is very personal; it’s the loss of a sibling, a parent, or a good friend. Sometimes it’s the loss of long-treasured plans. It is the background sadness, fundamental and seemingly underneath all things.

It’s the threat of miscarriage behind every pregnancy. This foundational sadness is not necessarily depressing, but it is always pressing - exerting force, demanding to be heard, demanding to be observed.

Do you know this feeling? Have you felt this anchor? Does it ever seem to overwhelm you? There is hope. Colossians 1:13-14 says, “For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (NIV).

Because of the love of Christ, we are set free from the bondage of our past and our fears, and Satan’s bonds over us are broken. We don’t owe anything, and we don’t need to work for our forgiveness or redemption. The price has already been paid by Jesus Christ.

“Our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good” (Titus 2:13-14).

What do you worry about? What regrets do you have? How can the promises of these verses help release you from the bondage of worry or regret?

READY TO RECEIVE GOD

by Sean Durity

Sigmund Bloom, a vinyl record collector, says that records are marrying music back to ritual. “You put the needle on the record, and you know that sound. It is a sound that prompts you to stop and prepare to receive something.” Advent is our season to prepare to receive God. We know the sounds, the smells, and the traditions that point the way. But do we really stop to prepare to receive God? Or have we let the rituals become lifeless or even point toward other things? And what does it mean to receive God?

The Christmas story gives us two perspectives on receiving God. Most obviously, we have Mary in Luke chapter 1. The angel comes and tells her that she will become the virgin mother of Jesus, Son of the Most High. Despite the seeming impossibility and her unworthiness, she says, “I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. ‘May your word to me be fulfilled’” (Luke 1:38, NIV). Mary embraces the new and impossible. She submits to a new path in life she never imagined. We don’t know all the ways that God had prepared her for that moment, but she is ready to receive and obey.

Then there is Joseph. Once he found out about Mary’s pregnancy, he decided to divorce her quietly without inflicting extra shame and guilt. We don’t know if Joseph disbelieved Mary’s word or just didn’t know, but divorce seemed the most Godly option to him. However, Matthew 1:20 says, “But as he considered these things, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream.” A word from God explaining the situation got Joseph’s attention. He had chosen his course but was ready to receive correction from God. Joseph, after waking, “did as the angel of the Lord had commanded” (Matthew 1:24). He received by obeying.

As you enter the rituals of this Christmas season, are you preparing to receive God? Are you willing to obey a word from Him? Or are you just going through the motions? Let this Advent be an intentional preparation. God may have a new, unexpected word for you. Or He may come to correct a decision already under way. Are you ready to receive Him?

HOPE FOR PROMISES

by Terry McLeod

Have you ever heard it said that “a real man’s word is his bond? If he can’t keep a promise, he doesn’t give his word”? Have you ever actually known someone like that? This amazing person would have impeccable character, honesty, and integrity. The recipient of his promise would have a confident hope that, regardless of circumstances, the promise would be fulfilled. No contract, witnesses, or lawyer needed here; just the surety of the spoken word and this honorable man will deliver. You could count on it!

Unfortunately, in our corrupt world, this “real man” is becoming more of a “rare man.” It doesn’t take much looking around to see the absence of integrity and character in our society. Promises evaporate like the morning dew or change with tomorrow’s headline. This is evidence of our broken human nature. When I look into my mirror, I too see one who has fallen short many times in fulfilling my promises over the years. We all have only one person who has never failed to deliver: God!

God’s promises, also called covenants, have been and will be perfectly fulfilled according to His holy purposes. Think of all the times God says “I will” throughout scripture regarding creation, the fall of man, Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, prophecies of the Jesus the Messiah, the Holy Spirit, salvation, hell, Heaven and the New Earth! The Holy Bible, God’s Word, is an epic narrative of His perfect character, promises, and their fulfillment to His chosen people and the church. He offers the promise of hope for the hopeless and the hope for promises fulfilled for those who believe in faith.

In Genesis 17, we see how Abraham and Sarah were promised by God that, though she was unable to have children, the Lord was going to bless them with innumerable offspring for generations. Abraham, in faith, believed God’s promise which, in time, resulted in the birth of Jesus, who died for our sins and rose from the dead to offer us eternal life.

Romans 4:20-22 says of Abraham’s faith, “he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God” (NIV). Abraham was certain that God could do what he had promised. So God accepted him, just as we read in the Scriptures.

Genesis also teaches that because of Abraham’s faith in God’s promise, it was counted to him as righteousness, or acceptance, by God. That same righteousness can be ours as we also trust God in faith. Romans 4:23-25 continues, “The words ‘it was credited to him’ were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness - for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.”

All throughout Scripture, the arrival of Jesus the Messiah and Savior was promised and prophesied by God; and He came! But even more has been promised as God has promised to save those who will receive Jesus by faith and ultimately bring them home to His glorious, joyful Heaven for eternity. God keeps His Word... God will deliver!

In what ways does my life reveal that I, with faith and hope, believe God will deliver on promises?

12/6/2019

WHAT ARE YOU HOPING FOR?

by Ted Towns

What are you hoping for? Great question, right? This time of the year you might think I am asking what you want for Christmas. I know there are many boys and girls hoping the man in the red suit will bring them lots of toys.

Hope is a powerful word. 1 Corinthians 13:13 says that it is one of three things that will last forever: “faith, hope, and love” (NIV).

The meaning of hope can be different depending on how you use the word. For some, the word is just wishful thinking. I hope I make an “A” on my math test even though I didn’t study. I hope to lose twenty pounds during the holidays. Or I hope my wife forgets that mistake I made last week. Wishful thinking, right?

Some of you may be wishing for a new house or a new job. For some it may be that partner you have been praying about. Webster’s defines hope this way: “to cherish a desire with expectation of fulfillment.”

All of us need hope. Some people are hoping to just make it through the day. Life is hard. They are struggling just trying to survive. They have bad health or bad finances and they’re just hoping to make it another day or another week. For some, their marriage is falling apart or they have a troubled child.

Hope is important for all of us. It is hard to make it through life without it. The Bible tells us that before we place our trust in Christ Jesus, we live “without hope and without God” (Ephesians 2:12, NIV).

Maybe you know of people like that. People who try to make it through life on their own, without God. Maybe you are one of them yourself.

Real hope is found in giving your life to Jesus Christ by trusting in Him for the forgiveness of your sin. In Him you can have real hope in today and tomorrow. Hope in the Christian’s life is not wishful thinking; it is confident expectation.

If you look up the word hope in the Holman Bible Dictionary it says, “Given the assurance of hope, Christians live in the present with confidence and face the future with courage.”

I pray that your hope is in Christ Jesus, not just for the future but also for today. I pray that “the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Romans 15:13).

What are you hoping for? Where have you placed your hope?

12/7/2019

HOPE FOR ETERNITY

by John Powers

We have all heard of the Greek myth of Pandora’s Box. In the story, Zeus gives Pandora a box with specific instructions to never open it. But, of course, curiosity got the better of her and she did open it, thereby letting all kinds of evil and horrors into the world. But in the corner of the box, there remained a small winged creature called Hope. It seems from this story that hope was the only thing left to sustain humans. And hope is a wonderful thing to have, even today. The hope for a better tomorrow, a better situation, a better outcome, better health, a better life, etc. But when it comes to eternal life, Christians have something much better than hope; we have God’s promise.

In John 3:16, Jesus says, “For God so loved the world that He gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life” (NIV). He says in John 14:2-4, “My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going.”

We all need hope in our lives. Without it, life on this earth would be overwhelming. Hope is a good thing, but God’s promise is so much better. By believing in redemption, following God’s Word, and most importantly, by God’s undeniable forgiveness and grace we can hope with utmost confidence in spending all eternity in Heaven with Jesus.

Are you trusting in God’s promise of hope this Christmas?

LOVE.

LOVE CHANGES EVERYTHING

by Phil Kiszie

In modern society, the word “love” is used in a multitude of ways, some of which are incorrect or inappropriate. So what is love? How do we actually define it and use it correctly? The Bible defines love as strong affection, desire, or devotion. We will focus on how love is addressed in the Bible since it is the wisdom of God, which shows us how to take His written knowledge and practically apply it to our lives in various circumstances.

Let's start by remembering that God is love. The Christmas season is our celebration of God coming into the world in human form (100% God and 100% man) as Jesus, also known to us as Emmanuel, which means “God with us.” What did Jesus have to say about love?

In the Gospels, Jesus was asked by a Pharisee what is the greatest command. He responded by saying to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” and to “Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commands” (Matthew 22: 37-40, NIV). Jesus wanted us to know that if we fulfill these two commands that have a foundation of love, we will naturally keep all the others. Later in the Gospels, before Jesus ascended to heaven, he said that he was giving a new command which is to love one another as he has loved us and by this all will know that we are his disciples (John 13: 34-45). Love was not new but loving as He loved was. This kind of love is noticed by everyone (believers and unbelievers) and it is evident that it is empowered by a supernatural source.

Once we are saved by grace (unmerited favor) through faith and we go deeper into relationship with God, we can receive revelation of His love (agape – unconditional). We then understand that we live in a relationship of love, acceptance, and victory with Him; we don't have to strive to earn these things from Him. This revelation is what propels us to effectively and genuinely love others.

So often during the Christmas season we focus on giving material gifts that Jesus tells us will pass away with this world. We as believers should be capitalizing on the opportunity to share the gift of Christlike love. If we do this then others will take note and unbelievers may be swayed, not by our words but by our actions. Our character, integrity, and actions all fueled by love, speak much louder and are more persuasive. Maybe then we will witness others accept the most important gift anyone can receive, Jesus Christ and the salvation he offers. Along with Christ they receive the Holy Spirit, the love and acceptance of God the Father, and eternity with Him. Wow, those are gifts! Even if people don't yet realize it, these are the most important gifts that one can receive. Our revelation of the blessing and opportunity to live in such a way that helps others move from death to life is proof that love changes everything.

Is there anything you need to surrender to the Lord or take on in obedience so you can live a life that represents Christlike love?

LOVE WITHOUT BARRIERS

by Jay Hart

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14, NIV).

We all have barriers in our lives. Some barriers are built to protect us, like castle walls and construction barricades. Other barriers we erect ourselves through fear and anxiety. Still others we build out of anger and hatred. It's those barriers built of fear and anger that really block us from showing love across them. It's naturally hard for us to love someone we are afraid of or angry with.

No one has more of a right to be angry with us than our holy God. In our unrepentant and sinful state, we deserve His full wrath and justice (Romans 2:5). Our sin separates us from Him (Isaiah 59:2). When we think about the barriers in our lives, specifically between us and those who we hold onto anger towards, we need to look to a more perfect example of love.

Romans 5:8 tells us, “But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Jesus demonstrated for us that real love, the kind of self-sacrificial love that He shows us, has no barriers. As enemies of God, we did not deserve His love nor His sacrifice. But even as enemies we were reconciled to God and saved by Jesus Christ (Romans 5:10). In His perfect love, He became one of us, lived a life that none of us could live, bore our sin on the cross, died a death we all deserve, and defeated sin and death so that we could be with Him for eternity.

Jesus crossed that barrier between heaven and earth to demonstrate His love to us, even when we did not deserve it. In this Advent season, we must look to the example that God gave us when His Son became one of us. If Christ crossed that barrier, we must break down the barriers of anger and fear to reach our Muslim neighbor, our atheist co-worker, or the family member that hurt us. Jesus showed us that real, genuine love has no barriers.

LOVE CAME DOWN

by Jay Christianson

As a Father and spiritual head of my family, there is a responsibility to make sure my children and grandchildren understand what Christmas is. I'm reminded of a special tradition my wife and I started with our children when they were very young. Now we carry it out with our second generation, our grandchildren.

With our own children, we started the first Sunday after Thanksgiving by presenting an Advent wreath and talking to them about the meaning of the Advent season. We lit one candle every Sunday until Christmas, and then on Christmas Day, we lit the white center candle to represent Jesus and His coming to earth. We taught them about the symbolism of the round wreath which is unending and represents the eternal nature of God, and about the greenery which represents life and commitment to God. Three candles are purple to represent royalty, since Jesus is our King.

The first Sunday, we lit the purple Prophecy candle, which represents a period of expectant waiting. We always discussed how the prophets announced the coming of the Savior for many years before He came. The second Sunday, we lit the purple Bethlehem candle to remind us to prepare to receive Christ in our hearts, and to prepare for His coming. We talked to our children about Jesus being born in Bethlehem and all who came to see Him there after He was born. The third Sunday, we lit the pink Shepherd's candle (or Joy candle), which reminds us of the joy of Christmas and the joy of the shepherds when the angels announced Jesus coming to them. The fourth Sunday, we lit the purple Angel's candle, which represents love. As John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (NIV). We talked to our children about God's great love in sending Jesus and the angels' joy in announcing His coming. On Christmas morning, we lit the center white candle, called the Christ's candle, which represents Jesus coming as the light of the world.

This tradition is now carried out with our grandchildren, but we've had to modify it slightly. Now we light all five candles at one time on the day we all gather to celebrate Christmas, which may or may not actually be Christmas Day. We tell them of God's love, so great a love that He sent His Son as a tiny baby as a beautiful gift to the world; a gift of love. The Advent wreath is a cherished tradition and one I'm glad we started.

Our adult children always remind us not to forget the wreath, although we'd never forget. Our grandchildren are starting to anticipate it and answer the questions. Our daughters still tease their brother because he was the only one who remembered every year what Advent means. We always started by asking that question. He always answered, "It means coming, Jesus coming." Now when we ask, they look at him and grin and say his name. He smiles and grins back. It's a blessing! It means so much to us that our children understand, and our grandchildren are learning what Christmas means. This tradition symbolizes how Love (Jesus) came down from above as a tiny baby, a Savior, to redeem us.

How can you use the Advent wreath to help your children understand how love came down at Christmas? Write about ways you demonstrate to your children and others how love came down at Christmas.

GOD IS FOR US

by Rich Dennard

As believers approaching Christmas, we feel a thankfulness and an adoration for Jesus like no other time of year apart from Easter. We deck our homes with the accoutrements of the season and read Christmas stories to our children. We cook the classic recipes and watch the classic films. We spend time with and call our friends and family to wish them a joyous holiday and a happy new year with promises to visit soon if it's been a while. We serve in our communities in hopes of spreading the love of Christ while often receiving blessings in return. We receive cards and exchange gifts with our family and loved ones.

Christmas is amazing!

However, for many, if not all of us at one time or another, the holidays can be very trying. Some mourn for the family member who is no longer here. Some experience unfortunate financial strain. Some see people with whom they have a conflict. Many travel. And what about shopping?! Yuck!

Seriously though, life doesn't get easier during the holidays, and if we're not careful and slow down, we might agree that in many ways it gets more hectic and more overwhelming. If we're not careful, we might blink and it'll be 2020 and we might have missed something that God had for us.

Life happens, but God is FOR US! He loves His children with such a profound love, I'll be honest with you, I have difficulty grasping it sometimes. Actually, a lot of times.

Here is what I know: God loves Jesus. John 3:35 says, "The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands" (NIV). God loves you despite your sins. Romans 5:8 says, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." And as born-again believers in Christ, we are now a part of God's family. John 1:12 says, "Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God."

So why does God put us through trials when He loves us so much? Especially during Christmas?! "I mean c'mon, God?" Don't we all feel this way from time to time? Especially when we think we are doing everything right?

A little further into the New Testament, we read in Hebrews 12:6 that "because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son." Aren't we like that with our own children? Realistically, it is the parent who disciplines his child that loves his child? So, as we feel the trials and tribulations of life become heavy - and for some, seemingly unbearable - we ought to slow down, pray, examine ourselves, and thank the Lord for loving us enough to sharpen us and mold us to look more like His Son.

How have you seen God prove His love for you through a trial or difficult experience?

LOVE FOR OTHERS

by John Clark

The old saying, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me,” is a lie. Words can be devastating and so can neglect.

Before Sue and I were married, I knew that she loved me. What an encouragement it was when she also expressed her love for me in front of a crowd of people during our wedding. I felt that I could leap tall buildings with a single bound. Since then, demonstrations of love from our children and friends have helped us both weather difficult issues in our lives. Often this expressed love was undeserved by me, but others made a decision to love me. Sometimes this love cost them - either in their time and effort, or by way of forgiving me.

When an attorney asked Jesus in Matthew 22:36-39, “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” Jesus said, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself” (NIV). Later in John 15:17, He said, “This is my command: Love each other.”

I have recently been really concentrating on the process of building character, defined by Andy Stanley as “the will to do what is right, as defined by God, regardless of personal cost.” Since God has already commanded me to love others, I don’t really need to pray about whether or not to love others. Since love is a decision rather than an emotion, if I am to build character and please God, I must decide to love others. Stanley says character involves loving our neighbors, even when they don’t reciprocate. When I fail to love others, I know that I have not only disobeyed Jesus, but I have yielded to how my flesh wants me to act.

How about you? As we celebrate God’s love for us during Advent (John 3:16), is there someone in your life that you have not yet decided to love? Perhaps this is someone who has said something bad about you or who always has a different opinion than you. Or could it be that loving someone would take time or effort that will not be repaid? Perhaps 1 John 4:7 would be a good verse to memorize this week: “Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.”

NOTHING CAN CHANGE GOD’S LOVE

by Josh Lassiter

“For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39, NIV).

Just after our first married Christmas, my wife and I decided that we were ready to take the big step of getting a dog. We determined that we needed a small dog to match the small apartment that we lived in. Then we met Bear. We adopted a two-week-old puppy that day and were told that he would weigh around 15 pounds fully grown. Well, Bear started growing and growing, and now we have a 70-pound crazy pitbull as part of the family. Through our first nine years of marriage, Bear has destroyed a couch, a utility room (the night before we sold the house), my wife’s Bible that I gave her on our wedding day, and much more. He has escaped our backyard countless times and has cost us a ton of money. Bear has not always been a lovable pet, and yet we love him. When I see him, I think not of the chaos that he caused, but of him being part of our family and of the joy that he has provided. We love Bear because he is our dog. We chose him. Our love isn’t perfect for him, but we still do love him at the end of the day. We knew when we got a dog that it would come with difficulty in that he wouldn’t always listen, and that we would have to discipline him. Yet we still went to that humane society and brought Bear home with us.

In reflecting on my relationship with Bear, I sometimes wonder if God views me in this way. I am certainly not perfect in the way that I follow Him. Though I haven’t exactly destroyed a couch, I have deliberately chosen to disobey the commands God has given me more times than I would like to admit. Since the day God saved me and adopted me into His family, I have failed more often than I have succeeded. The things I do and the way I act don’t easily lend themselves to being loved.

How wonderful then is it that God’s love will NEVER fail us! It will NEVER leave us, and it will NEVER change. Romans 8:38-39 tells us that there is nothing “in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” This shows us how amazing God’s love for us really is when you compare it to our idea of “love.” He loves us with an unending and perfect love. My human love is finite and imperfect. I can be swayed from one moment or incident to the next. God’s love is infinite and perfect. What security this should give us! My love may be imperfect and conditional, but Psalm 136 says that “His love endures forever.” It never changes! In this Advent season, let us walk in that security. The almighty God of the universe loves us deeply. May we share that love with our family, friends, and those we meet.

12/14/2019

NEVER ALONE

by Dwayne Edde

Read Luke 22:31-33, Matthew 26:40, 73-75, and John 21:3, 15-17.

Peter was a determined man but misguided in so many ways. He wanted to be a part of what Jesus was doing, but he wasn't sure how it was going to play out. Nonetheless, he was fully committed to following Jesus and sharing in the hardships, and he believed his faithfulness and sacrifice would help him to be the best follower. He left his old way of life and everything it included to start a new direction that in every way appeared to be going in only one direction.

After more than three years of being close to Jesus and seeing many wonderful things, he was confident that all others may fall away from Jesus, but there was nothing that could cause him to turn away, not even prison or death. He made this promise while looking Jesus in the eye. This promise was unchangeable in Peter's mind, but he likely thought he would never have to decide between the two.

Then the beginning of the end of Jesus' life began to play out. Jesus himself pointed out Peter's first failure in that he couldn't even stay awake and pray for one hour. Then in his attempt to prove his unwavering devotion to Jesus, he cut the ear off a servant to the high priest and was again rebuked by Jesus for doing the wrong thing. Later, he denied knowing Jesus and began cursing as if to emphasize his denial.

Having failed so miserably in his relationship with Christ and unable to prevent the crucifixion, Peter probably believed his only option left was to go back to his old life. He truly loved Jesus, but Jesus was gone. To make matters worse, he never had the chance to apologize before Jesus was executed. In the midst of his despair, he invited some of the other disciples to go fishing with him.

Peter was sitting on the boat with his friends and has once again failed at even being a fisherman as they haven't caught a single fish. At this point, Peter was most likely feeling like he was worthless and a complete failure destined to spend the remainder of his life alone and without purpose. At this, perhaps the lowest point in his life, resurrected Jesus made the point of reassuring Peter that God has a real purpose for his life. Jesus spent more time talking to Peter than all the other disciples to show that despite so many painful failures, Jesus' love for Peter never faltered. In fact, Jesus had a plan for Peter that was far greater than anything he could imagine.

Have your failures caused you to doubt God's love for you? Have you isolated yourself because you think God's love has diminished because of your failures? Have you realized that God wants to use you to be the spiritual leader of your family regardless of your past failures?

JOY.

JOY IN THE ASHES

by Lewis Hayberg

As we approach the Christmas season (The first Advent), sometimes life leaves us less than joyous. We hear the Christmas songs, we see the Christmas cards, and we see others around us greeting us with cheer and joy, yet our joy can be flat or nonexistent. The problem comes when we view joy as a conditional state dependant upon where we are currently in relationships, finances, and life. The good news is that joy does not have to diminish when we face trials and strife.

The joy that is found in Christ supersedes any current situation in anticipation of the hope of his appearing (Second Advent)!

I Peter 4:13 says, “But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed” (NIV). God’s word reveals that at his second coming, all the pain and suffering will not matter. The hope of his appearing for the Christian is not just joyous; it is EXCEEDINGLY JOYOUS! So in light of eternity, if we stay focused on his glorious appearing, we cannot help but be filled with joy because in eternity, all the junk we are dealing with will not matter.

Philippians 3:20-21 tells us “our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.”

With a promise like this, joy should flow out of every aspect of who we are in Christ. With the promise of a new glorified body and called a son of God, we are “more than conquerors” (Romans 8:37).

As we go about this Christmas season, rest in the joy of the birth of Christ, the joy of our salvation. Take time to consider all God has done to reconcile you back to Him. Spend some time in prayer today asking God to give you a heart like the Psalmist: “Blessed are those who have learned to acclaim you, who walk in the light of your presence, Lord” (Psalm 89:15).

REDISCOVERING JOY

by Tommy Poole

Christmas is a time of joy! We sing about it. We have festivities, decorations, gifts, tasty treats, and the list goes on and on. And yet many of us find it difficult to have joy during this most joyous of seasons. Maybe it’s the pressure of finding the right gifts. Maybe it’s the pressure of paying for those right gifts. Maybe it’s that empty seat at the table that belonged to a loved one who has passed on. Maybe it’s being at odds with a loved one. We sing “Joy to the World,” but sometimes we’re not feeling it.

Despite our feelings, the truth is that Christmas IS a joyous time. After all, we are celebrating the birth of our Savior; God becoming man to save us. So how do we rediscover the joy of Christmas this season? Here are a few suggestions:

First, recognize that true joy in this fallen world is no less a miracle than the parting of the Red Sea or the feeding of the 5,000. And because it’s a miracle, it’s impossible apart from the power of God in our lives. Nothing else comes close. When joy seems far away, remember that Jesus tells us in Matthew 19:2: “with God all things are possible” (NIV). Even our joy.

And since our joy is dependant upon God, we must confess anything that is getting in the way of our fellowship with Him. In Psalm 51:12, David asks God to “restore to me the joy of your salvation.” David had sinned and joy was nowhere to be found. In his desperation, he cried out to God, confessing his sin and pleading for the sweetness of the joy of the Lord. Like David, our sin interrupts the joy of God’s salvation. (It is important to note that while our joy can be interrupted, our salvation is always secure - praise God!)

Finally, once we have confessed our sins, we should simply ask God for joy. David asked God to restore his joy. In Matthew 7:7, Jesus tells us to “ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.” And Paul reminds us in Ephesians 3:20 that He “is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us.” God is generous and God is able. And He wants you to have a joyful Christmas season!

Is the miracle of God’s joy alive in your life? What might be getting in the way? Will you ask Jesus today to fill you with His joy?

HOPE: NOSTALGIA

by Matt Godfrey

Nostalgia: a sense of longing for “home.” The Oxford dictionary defines it as: “A sentimental longing or wistful affection for a period in the past.” What are your happy associations? Hot chocolate, warm fires, cozy blankets, Christmas songs, nativity scenes? For most people, Christmas brings a feeling of nostalgia.

Maybe this year there will be a “first” for you - you got married, you lost a loved one, you’re an empty nester, or maybe you feel like your nest is too full! Whatever stage of life you are in, more than likely, you will reminisce on days of old. Christmas has a way of doing that, doesn’t it? I believe that Christmas is the perfect opportunity to be reminded that this world is not our home. We are “homesick” for a place we have yet to see or visit.

Jesus left His home in heaven to live with us. Have you ever wondered if He missed home? Can’t you just imagine Him saying, “Hey Dad, do you think you can just hold off these mosquitoes this year?!” Ha! He left His throne in heaven and came to live a simple life with us. Humanity didn’t even know He had come to earth. Only the lowliest of shepherds had gotten word of His birth.

Isn’t it amazing, though? God sent His son Jesus and He would be called Emmanuel, meaning “God with us!” This world was not his home, and neither is it ours. We are all hardwired with a God-shaped hole and a longing for a heavenly home. He came to earth to offer us a way to get back home. Wouldn’t you like to go home - back to the place where you felt most safe, most known, most at peace?

Many times we get nostalgic for a simpler time or place. Are you tired this Christmas season? Are you longing for a simpler time? In Matthew 11:28, Jesus says, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (NIV). Rest. Do you remember that place growing up that you felt most at ease and could rest? It might have been your parents’ house, your grandma’s house, or another loved one’s house. Jesus is calling you to that same kind of rest.

He longs to take your burdens and anxious thoughts. Let’s take Him up on His word. This Christmas season, when you catch yourself longing for home, thank the Lord that this world is not our home. Our hope is in Him! Our home is where He is and He even told us that He has gone to prepare a place for us! How much better will His home for us be than this world?

JOY IS NO SECRET

by Greg Bundy

“But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.’” (Luke 2:10, NIV).

One week before Christmas. The most wonderful time of the year filled with peace and joy. However, it is often also filled with stress and pressure (although that doesn’t make as good of a carol to sing while decking the halls). The knowledge that we are supposed to be filled with joy as Christians (even commanded to be joyfull!) can serve to increase the distress and lack of joy even more as we wonder why we do not feel the abundant Christian life we know we are supposed to have. So what are we to do?

The first step is to realize that joy is one of those elusive ideas (along with things like peace and love) where the more we seek it for ourselves, the less we find we have it. The more we add stuff and experiences trying to fulfill our own desires, the less they satisfy. So we add more stuff: more elaborate and frequent vacations, bigger stuff, better stuff, faster stuff, newer stuff. But it still doesn’t bring lasting joy. We weren’t meant to focus on fulfilling our own desires, but to focus on loving God and loving others. As we focus on sharing love and joy with others, we tend to find that we obtain that elusive joy ourselves as a byproduct.

The second step is to identify those things that we fear and worry about that rob us of our joy. The Bible is filled with commands not to fear (see Philippians 4:6-7 and John 14:27). Why is this seemingly impossible command so important? I believe that God commands us not to fear over and over again because he knows that our fears point out to us the things that we put our trust in more than Him. When I worry about my job or money, it is because I am putting more faith in those things than I am in the sufficiency of God. When I worry about my health, my life, my family, or my future, that points me to the things in my life that I put ahead of my full dependence and trust in God. Anything we put ahead of God will ultimately steal the joy in our life.

So how do we obtain joy? Focus on serving others. Focus on God and trusting in Him fully above all other concerns in this life. Focus on the good news of great joy of Jesus! What are those areas in my life where I have allowed worry and fear to creep in and steal my joy?

IMPOSSIBLE JOY

by David Knicely

“But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. For it is better, if it is God’s will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil” (1 Peter 3:15-17, NIV).

Have you ever finished a task or gotten through a tough time and thought, “Whew, I didn’t know if I was going to make it through _____?” Life can be tough; but that doesn’t mean that tough times are always negative. As you grow through life, there will be issues that you have to face both personally and professionally. The Bible promises that you will face tribulation and trials. The Bible also promises that “you will be blessed.” This doesn’t mean that it’s not okay to feel bad when you are going through a tough time; it means that as a Christian, you have something inside you, something feeding you, something giving you impossible joy.

Navigating your feelings during tough times can make situations seem even harder and can make life seem unfair. It is easy to become calloused, closed, and even spiteful towards a situation or person that is making life difficult. But if you experience the condition with God’s presence in the situation, then all that fades away, because inside of you is impossible joy. It is important to remember the verse above, because while it says “it is better...to suffer for doing good,” it also says, “if it is God’s will.” You won’t always suffer when doing good, but you might. No matter what you face though, God chose you to go through it with Him, and he will never abandon you, even if you don’t understand.

While you look forward toward the end of life’s road to an eternity in heaven in the presence of God, the privilege of being a part of His purpose should fill you with impossible joy even on the darkest days. Are you responding to your situations with “gentleness and respect?” The next time you’re reflecting on a hardship, or feel like you are alone, think about how God has shown up and worked in your life. Who has God placed in your path? Close your eyes and think outside the box about what you’re going through, and ask God to show you joy.

GREAT JOY

by Sean Durity

“But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.’” (Luke 2:10-11, NIV).

As I sit to try and write this devotional about joy, my 15-year-old daughter, Gwendolyn, is having seizures. She has had seizures since her 6-month vaccinations. How can I write about joy? Isn’t joy the emotional reaction to something great happening? A new child? A great victory? The fall of an oppressive enemy? A long-strived for achievement? A long-awaited gathering? A precious gift given or received? All of these are causes for joyous celebration. But joy is more than extreme happiness because of current circumstances.

Joy is the unshakable confidence that God is at work in my life, right now, no matter what it looks like. (This is a contrast with Christian hope – which is the unshakable expectation that our good God controls the future.) I can choose to live in joy.

The angels proclaimed to the shepherds good news of great joy – a joy “which will be for all people” (even us). How can we choose to experience that joy? Looking closer at the good news helps:

“**Today:**” No more waiting and wondering. God is at work in the present. Like the shepherds, we can be busy with normal life, but God is up to something.

“**In the city of David:**” To the shepherds, this would be a reminder of the Messiah’s royal lineage and those related promises (see 1 Chronicles 17:7-14). More personally, though, He is nearby. God’s work is right in their town.

“**Born for you:**” A child’s birth is always joyful to his or her family. But This Child is a gift to all of us. An unexpected gift at an unexpected time. God’s work is surprising and can be in the normal events of life. With God’s touch, they become much more than normal.

“**A Savior:**” God has given His all to rescue us. He provides for our greatest need. He does what no one else can do. Joy starts with accepting Jesus as Savior.

“**Christ:**” The long-awaited promised One. God is fulfilling what He has always promised. He is faithful.

“**The Lord:**” God Himself. The Giver and the Gift. Ultimately joy is in and from the Lord. “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” (Philippians 4:4).

Those shepherds’ outward circumstances did not change. They went back to their flocks and families. However, they told anyone who would listen about the joy they were experiencing. God was at work in their lives, in their town, right then.

I don’t understand how or why, but I do trust that God is at work in my life even through my daughter’s seizures today. I choose joy. How can God’s good news give you joy today?

12/21/2019

JOY ISN'T JUST A HAPPY THOUGHT

by Brandon Aldrich

Most of us are undoubtedly familiar with at least the title of the book by Gary Smalley, "Love is a Decision." Reading through this eye-opener as a young man, I first understood that a love that is true and unfading must draw upon something more consistent than feelings, which ebb and flow like the ocean tides. That bedrock source of stability, of course, is a decision – a commitment – to devote oneself to another's best interest, regardless of the personal cost. Or, in other words, a decision to love.

It really should come as no surprise that it works exactly the same way with joy. Happy feelings come and go, and are largely dependent upon our circumstances. Was there an agreeable traffic pattern on the way to work? Did my co-worker compliment me for something I've done? Were my spouse and children in a good mood yesterday? Did my team win the game last night? But just like love, a joy that is real and infectious must be built upon a solid foundation, one unmoved by the circumstantial twists and turns of daily life.

How firm a foundation, then, is found in these words from Peter: "Though you have not seen [Jesus], you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls" (1 Peter 1: 8-9, NIV). Indeed, recognizing that Jesus has not only redeemed our souls from the pit, but has also prepared an eternity beyond our imaginations will tend to put one's difficulties into perspective. Furthermore, a decision for joy based on such truth will surely bear this fruit of the Spirit in the present age. It might even make one happy, too!

A friend of mine that likes to avoid conflict often says, "Let's look at this in the light of eternity." That's not a bad idea when certain "joy-killers" interrupt your day. So the next time Mr. Urban Assault Vehicle cuts you off, or your boss is grumpy, or you've had just about enough of "one more" obligatory Christmas activity, make a decision for joy. Lift up your head, raise your hands into the air, and declare with your mouth, "The joy of the Lord is my strength!"

How will you choose to act joyful today? How will you choose to be a reflection of the joy of the Lord this Advent season?

PEACE.

PRACTICAL PEACE

by Jonathan Elmer

If you spend any amount of time anywhere this Christmas season, you might hear a reference or two to Luke 2:11, “Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord” (NIV). Later in verse 14, the angels sing, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

These passages refer back to the prophet Isaiah, who foretold the birth of Christ: “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6).

It is ironic that Christmas is one of the busiest times of the year, from parties and pageants to packages and presents. But in the busyness, we still see at the center of Christmas the baby in a manger, born on this day, Christ the Lord. We see a savior and king, who came to earth humbly but with a purpose, to die on the cross for our sins; a plan which Paul says God set forth “to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ” (Eph. 1:10). In the complete picture of our faith, God’s plan for reconciliation is indeed, perfect.

How is it, then, that we so often lose what is perhaps the most endearing promise of Christ’s birth? We see the words and themes all around us; indeed, I have already mentioned it twice. But finding it is difficult. Grasping onto it and keeping it is nearly impossible.

I’m talking about peace. Peace on earth. Peace in our hearts. Practical peace.

The Bible gives us hope. Paul says that Jesus is himself our peace (Ephesians 3:14). In his letter to the Galatians, he lists peace as a fruit of the Spirit (Ephesians 5:22), an outpouring of a life lived in the Spirit through Christ. And in Philippians, we are promised the peace of God which surpasses all understanding if we will simply ask God for it in prayer (Ephesians 4:7).

This world is troubled; around every corner is controversy and conflict. Perhaps you are struggling right now in relationships with your spouse or your family. Maybe you are in the middle of a fight with a friend or co-worker. Perhaps you are simply overwhelmed with our culture, where instantaneous and often negative reactions on social media tend to dominate our attention in ever-increasing ways. When you are weary, tired, or confused, my prayer is that you will find rest in Jesus, who is our hope, the Prince of Peace.

This is His promise to us, which Jesus spoke to his disciples in his last days: “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

LIVING AT THE PITCH OF PEACE

by Jim Dodgen

When I think of the word “pitch” I think about baseball, not music like my lovely wife of 35 years. In baseball, which I love and played most of my life, a pitch can be many types. Fast ball, curve ball, slider, drop ball, knuckle ball - just to name a few. My ability to hit a particular pitch highly depends upon my preparation and practice.

I believe it is that same way with our “peace” with the Lord in this world. Scripture teaches us to prepare for whatever “pitch” life throws you by preparing for the day with the Word of God. Two Scriptures come to mind:

1. “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people” (Ephesians 6:10-18, NIV).
2. “Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8).

Scripture also teaches us to practice, or live out, our faith in this world. We attend convicting church services and inspiring conferences, and we should be quick to thank God for these opportunities. However, if these moments aren’t supported by the daily practice of our faith, we run the risk “striking out” when the devil attacks.

“Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me - put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you” (Phil. 4:9).

Treat your relationship with God just like you would any other important relationship in your life. Work at it, cherish it, and do what you need to in order to strengthen it. Have you spent time practicing and preparing for whatever “pitch” this world will throw you today?

God loves us unconditionally. I urge you to remember to give Him the time He deserves each day. Get into the Word! Your peace depends on it.